



## Masked: the life of Anna Leonowens, schoolmistress at the court of Siam

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**Masked: the life of Anna Leonowens, schoolmistress at the court of Siam**, by Alfred Habegger, Madison, WI, University of Wisconsin Press, 2014, 560 pp., US\$28.95 (hardback)

Long after the fictional and cinematographic treatments, Anna Leonowens (1831–1915), the tutor of King Mongkut's wives and children, has finally received an exhaustive biographical treatment as well. This is the second biography of Leonowens written by an academic and published by a university press in the last few years, after Susan Morgan's *Bombay Anna* (Berkeley, 2008). The author of *Masked* criticises Morgan's biography for being "as lightly researched as ... heavily fictionalized" (p. 13). Habegger, like Morgan, is a professor of English. His earlier books include biographies of Henry James and Emily Dickinson. While Anna Leonowens's status as both a literary author and character arguably accounts for such an interest, her globe-trotting life was exemplary of imperial networks, which are nowadays as popular among literature scholars as they are among historians.

One major difference is that, while Morgan's book contains only one chapter on Leonowens's stay in Siam (1862 to 1867), Habegger devotes ten chapters to it, making this period his book's main focus. He then summarises the last 48 years of Leonowens's long life in just two chapters, before examining in the last two chapters her posthumous transfiguration into the semi-fictional character of novels and films. A note on the transliteration of Thai words emphasises the centrality of Leonowens's Bangkok sojourn to Habegger's biography, because it is this period that furnished the material of both Leonowens's own inventive autobiographical accounts and of Margaret Landon's novel that inspired *The King and I* musical and films. Early in the Introduction, Habegger explicates the book's title. "To make sense of her remarkable life, a biographer has to do two things: find the traces of what she covered up in her worldwide odyssey, and pay attention to the remarkable fit between her powerful lies and the New World's innocent and ignorant dreams" (p. 4). This biography is thus an exercise in demystification whose targets are Anna's deceits and self-delusions, and American credulity and die-hard preconceptions. Her life story suited "what Americans wanted to hear: how a fine, upright person brings democracy to a half-barbaric nation and saves it from an opportunistic colonizer" (p. 384). Habegger's edifying method of testing the veracity of Leonowens's account of events against historical sources and his frequent psychologising, however, make for tiresome reading. It is arguably too moot for the average reader of biographies, yet also unsatisfactory for an academic audience.

Let me consider some instances of Habegger's demystification of Leonowens's self-representation through autobiographical writing as a proto-feminist crusader who loudly objected to the degrading treatment of women at the Bangkok court. In a chapter about differences in Thai and Western sexual mores, Habegger explains Leonowens's detestation of male polygamy as a result of her belief in the sacredness of marriage and motherhood – views that were in fact prevalent among Victorians. Most Westerners who wrote about Siam at the time stigmatised the royal harem on moral grounds without understanding its political function. Yet Habegger favours psychology to account for Leonowens's self-concealment and ponders, with reference to her own insecurity throughout marriage and early widowhood: "Behind Anna's fervent denunciations of harems lay an unasked question about her own life: how free had *she* been?" (p. 207; original italics).

Retracing Leonowens's own fictionalised memoirs of her Siamese years, Habegger crowns his narration with the false story of the burning at the stake of Tuptim, a young woman who had allegedly escaped the harem to join her lover. Anna's concoction of a story that cast King Mongkut as a vicious Oriental despot is explained partly as moral revenge against her gruff employer, and partly as autobiographical sublimation of an India-born Englishwoman who had rejected the prospect of a comfortable life with an older husband to marry the loved one who

died prematurely: “Anna and Tuptim both gambled on a high-risk life with the young man they loved. They both won and they both lost” (p. 286).

Scrutinising Leonowens’s life through her writings would appear an exercise eminently suited to a literary scholar such as Habegger, not least because he could be expected to approach the subject with a nuanced understanding of the distinction between lived experience and its narration, and between autobiography as life-writing and as self-fashioning (cf. Philip Holden, *Autobiography and Decolonization*, Madison, 2008). But Habegger’s approach is uncomplicated: to separate fact from fiction in order to unmask Leonowens’s persona and discover the real Anna behind the mask. This clear-cut conception of biographical truth ignores how different modes of memorialising shape what is remembered of the past and how. Even though Leonowens was an accidental teacher, she definitely knew how to transform an uncommon life into a memorable one through writing. Habegger’s massive biography, despite the wide-ranging archival research and familiarity with recent historiography that inform it, unfortunately says little on this most critical aspect of the English governess character.

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**Deciphering Southern Thailand’s violence: organization and insurgent practices of BRN-Coordinate**, by Sascha Helbardt, Singapore, ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute, 2015, 257 pp., US\$29.90 (paperback)

In 2004, when violence broke out anew in Southern Thailand’s majority Malay Muslim provinces, no one claimed credit. Observers were at a loss to explain the unexpected eruption. Since then, more than 6,000 people have died in the smouldering conflict between insurgents and Thai government forces. Sascha Helbardt argues that the Barisan Revolusi Nasional Koordinasi or BRN-Coordinate, a group that splintered from the National Revolutionary Front, is behind the violence. His study reveals a great deal about the organisation responsible for the bloodshed in the south, and counters stereotypes of Muslim insurgents as religious fanatics.

*Deciphering Southern Thailand’s Violence* is a resource book about the BRN-Coordinate. It explores the group’s organisational structure and potential tensions within it; it analyses recruitment mechanisms and motivations to join; and it attempts to explain how and why the group perpetrates violence. Helbardt describes the BRN-Coordinate as a loose network of village cells that retain their autonomy while integrated within a sophisticated, centralised hierarchical organisation that has political and military wings. It is a part-time guerrilla movement with around 3,000 trained fighters embedded in Malay Muslim villages and an estimated 30,000 supporters. The BRN-Coordinate and its recruits live and work in their communities. It is a secret organisation that takes advantage of the Thai government’s limited local presence and control.

Although the goals and motivations of individual members vary, Helbardt maintains that the organisation seeks to establish an independent Islamic state comprised of Narathiwat, Yala, Pattani and several Malay Muslim dominated districts in Songkhla province. Leaders of the BRN-Coordinate political wing fuse nationalism (Pattani) with jihadist thought in their village-based educational or “indoctrination” lessons. According to Helbardt, it is not useful or necessary to